

Written on MARCH 5, 2013 AT 9:04 AM by VKREMER

# Adaptive Yoga Changes Lives

Filed under CORPSMAN, FLEET AND THE FLEET MARINE FORCE, HEATH (ONE COMMENT)

By Rear Adm. Tom Steffens (Ret.), former Navy SEAL and founder, Exalted Warrior Foundation



Rear Adm. Tom Steffens (Ret.) assists a student during a yoga class. (Photo by Rebecca

About seven years ago I was visiting a wounded SEAL at Walter Reed, and I watched the terrific therapy he was doing/receiving. While he was at it, I noticed that it really had a lot of strength components but not the stretching or core work that I had learned as part of my rehab from an injury 15 years earlier. Back then, the more I practiced, the better I felt all over. Core, back, neck, joints, all of which ached (isn't that normal?) as well as a remarkable focusing and calming effect.

So I met with my yoga teacher, Annie Okerlin, and we met with the Surgeon General of the [U.S. Special Ops Command](#). We told him our idea about bringing yoga to the treatment of the wounded. He linked us up with the head of Therapy at Walter Reed, who was open to introducing adaptive yoga to both her staff and the patients. She was so helpful. For the next two years, we traveled to Walter Reed and Annie developed Adaptive Yoga procedures for

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various patients.

As the practice was refined and as the number of patients and therapists who employed the adaptive yoga grew, it was realized that a much more regular class was needed and the SAME teacher needed to be there week after week. This led to the establishment of the [Exalted Warrior Foundation](#) and an entire set of best practices. Experienced, mature teachers were recruited, interviewed and received special training and regular classes were scheduled. Ann Richardson Stevens of Studio Bamboo in Virginia Beach was one of the first teachers we thought of and recruited.

Who knew how helpful this would be! The whole mind, body, spirit connection and the demand on our troops went into new territory with the length of the wars and the repeated deployments. The adaptive yoga seemed to help everyone, but especially those suffering from traumatic brain injury (TBI), post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the wide range of traumatic combat injuries.

It is not unusual for someone from the yoga class to say, “What was that?,” “I really feel different,” or “That’s the first time I’ve been that relaxed in two years.” We all thought about it – the pressures of Boot Camp, pre-deployment training, extended and repeated deployments away from family, and then getting wounded or injured. Well, combine all that with the trauma of seeing your team mates being wounded or killed. These guys and gals never got a chance to relax. The adaptive yoga, along with so much else in their great therapy programs, was allowing them to gain more control and to focus on the moment, not the past. Maybe the future isn’t so bleak.



Rear Adm. Tom Steffens (Ret.) assists a student during a yoga class. (Photo by Rebecca Perron)

bring the program there, we were a bit bowled over. Capt. Zinke, who was the head of therapy was immediately engaged. What had taken months and even years at other locations took

As we got to know more wounded Marines, it led us to the [Wounded Warrior Regiment](#). Annie and Ann held classes for the Regimental staff, as well as at a few military hospitals including Portsmouth, and at the [Semper Fi Odyssey Camp](#) up in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Yoga is included there as one of the life skills that aids the Marines and Soldiers who attend in their transition home. All of these efforts we encountered were so impressive. But the most impressive thing is the individual effort that each Marine and Soldier puts into it. It makes you proud to be with these remarkable Americans, their families and their caregivers (don’t forget the Herculean effort they perform – their staying power and patience and dedication is absolutely amazing). It is a real team effort.

When we approached [Naval Medical Center Portsmouth](#) to

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days. Capt. Tom Craig was a catalyst in making it happen. And the Marine Detachment was really helpful in getting the word out and finding a space. But the person who makes it happen is Ann Richardson Stevens who has been teaching classes once a week at Portsmouth and periodically bringing the Marines to her Studio Bamboo in Virginia Beach. She has a great rapport with the Marines, and tells them, “This isn’t your mother’s yoga”. No slack there. Trust me.

And the results that the Marines feel are evident. You can’t help but feel better. Whether your wound or injury is from gunshot or explosion or accident or disease, whether its TBI or PTSD, yoga increases your breathing, gets your body more oxygen, gets your mind focused on the moment, links you up again in a team, builds your core, and certainly stretches and strengthens all those atrophied muscles. Not bad for an hour’s work.

Recently there have been a whole slew of scientific and medical studies to back up what the hundreds of Marines and Soldiers who have attended these adaptive yoga classes and their teachers knew all along. Yoga works.

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Elliott Edenfield  
You might be my role models. Thank you to the write-up

